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HOUSES OF CULTURE AS PLACES OF/IN MEMORY²

Abstract

This paper introduces key concepts of a preliminary project concerning houses of culture in former Czechoslovakia. Houses of culture used to be perceived as one of the signs, as well as a platform of establishing power during the communist era. The project will concentrate on various aspects of planning, building and managing houses of culture. In our research project we apply the “history from below” approach while viewing these Houses as a kind of “*les Lieux de Mémoire*” (places of memory). The chosen approach will require one to find historical witnesses and conduct a series of interviews with them in order to find out how houses of culture shaped their life during the communist era and, on the other hand, how people shaped the cultural life of these institutions.

Key words: houses of culture, memory studies, oral history, communist era

INTRODUCTION

Houses of culture, or cultural houses, were one of the significant signs of the power of communist regime in several states in the so called “Eastern bloc”. In this paper, we aim to introduce key notions of a preliminary project concerning houses of culture in former Czechoslovakia. The houses of culture used to be perceived as one of the signs, as well as a platform of establishing power during the communist era.

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I would like to start with a definition of what a house of culture is and how these institutions and buildings were built and used during the communist period of our history.

It may be interesting to start with the most widely available definition of a house of culture, namely that which is to be found on Wikipedia.

Palace of Culture (Russian: Дворец культуры, *dvorets kultura*, Chinese: 文化宮, *wénhuà gōng*) or House of Culture (*dom kultura*) was the name for major club-houses in the Soviet Union and the rest of the Eastern bloc. It was an establishment for all kinds of recreational activities and hobbies: sports, collecting, arts, etc.; the Palace of Culture was designed to have room for multiple uses. A typical Palace contained one or several cinema halls, concert hall(s), dance studios (folk dance, ballet, ballroom dance), various do-it-yourself hobby groups, amateur-radio groups, amateur-theatre studios, amateur musical studios and bands, *lectoriums* (lecture halls), and many more. Groups were also subdivided by age of participants, from children to retirees. A public library may sometimes have been housed in the Palace of Culture as well. All hobby groups were free of charge until most recent times, when many hobbies with less official recognition were housed based on “self-repayment”. A Palace of Culture was sometimes called a “club”, but this did not mean that it was membership-based (Palace of Culture, n.d.).

This definition may help us to appreciate the significance of houses of culture in the past and present.

We have attempted to analyse and connect houses of culture according to the location and the size of the building, which has led to them being divided into two main categories:

1. Houses of culture which were enormous monumental buildings intended for thousands of visitors and participants and mainly built in the capital cities of each Eastern bloc country.

Examples:

Palace of Culture and Science in Warsaw (Picture 1)

Congress Centre of Prague (formerly Palace of Culture in Prague) (Picture 2)

House of the Revolutionary Trade Union Movement in Bratislava (Picture 3)

These houses of culture are the subject of public discussion. The problematic issue in discussions conducted by municipal or regional authorities is the financial support of this sort of multifunctional cultural facility (for instance, various problems with the maintenance of oversized buildings).

2. Houses of culture in smaller towns which were built with the intention of covering not only all local cultural life but also social, communal and, of course, political life in the towns and villages of the country³ (House of Culture in Levice; House of Culture in Skalica – Pictures 4 and 5).

We have found statistical data how many houses of culture were built in formerly communist Czechoslovakia. We will mention these data and their application in our project later in this paper.

THE AIMS OF OUR RESEARCH PROJECT

One of the main goals of our project is to ascertain the significance of houses of culture for the local inhabitants and as a factor in the development of cultural life in the past and present.

Getting to know the real stories behind building and maintaining these particular buildings and institutions will be possible through finding historical witnesses connected with establishing houses of culture, working for such institutions, as well as those going there for entertainment purposes. As, in our view, these Houses are kind of “*les Lieux de Mémoire*” (places of memory), our project could be viewed as a part of memory studies.

We also aim to determine what the local people remember about the communist period of our history. In this sense, houses of culture would constitute a methodological tool through which we would be able to see how they perceive the communist period of Slovak (Czechoslovak) history.

This will be achieved through a qualitative research approach, namely by using the oral history method. However, in the first place, we have to complete archival research in order to find useful materials in archives. Studying and analysing literature from different fields of social science (mainly history, but also sociology and economic aspects) will also prove useful to us.

Our project may be viewed as a part of memory studies (what is remembered and how it is remembered in different ways of meaning) with a subdivision of nostalgia research (how people feel about past periods of history). Thus, is the communist period seen as “the good old days”?

³ Houses of culture could be also very nice and inspiring buildings, such as The Guild House of the Religious and Farmer’s League built between years 1904–1905 (Bořutová & Lehmannová, 2010) situated in a small town in western part of Slovakia called Skalica. The creator of the architectonic design was Dušan Samuel Jurkovič known as the initiator of art nouveau style at the beginning of 20th century in Czechoslovakia.

THE MEANING OF THE TITLE OF OUR PROJECT

Houses of culture as places *in* memory

This meaning views a house of culture as a spiritual place, which was and still is remembered by the participants in the cultural life of houses of culture. The events and circumstances linked to houses of culture are seen as traces in memory. By using the oral history method, we will attempt to record these memories, following which they will be analysed.⁴

Houses of culture as places *of* memory

The second line of our research is as important as the first, namely we are interested in studying houses of culture as material subjects, where various cultural/political and other events were held and various human activities were conducted.

As these two ways of thinking are interconnected, it is necessary to study and analyse them linked together.

A SHORT HISTORY OF THE FOUNDING OF HOUSES OF CULTURE

The history of establishing and building houses of culture relates to the growing importance of social and community life of various types, structures and social groups during the 19th century all over Europe. Previously, residences of the aristocracy constituted venues for special cultural events. Various cultural institutions with particular interests, purposes and specific needs were founded during 19th century, namely: museums (oriented towards science or art), theatres, libraries, concert halls, but also buildings for different cultural and sporting activities. In the 20th century, cinemas also started to be part of the facilities offered by houses of culture. Cultural content also needed a certain architectural form, which was adapted to the (additionally representative) function of the cultural institution.

Venues for different cultural events and audiences with different cultural/ethnic/religious expectations were established during the 19th century in the Austrian, later Austro-Hungarian Empire. The importance of establishing this type of cultural institution was also stressed during the existence of the first Czechoslovak Republic.⁵ During this important period

⁴ The memories about the events, which were organised in those houses for instance. The recollections of the organisers and managers of those institutions are significant for our project as well.

⁵ From 1918 to 1938.

of history for Czech and Slovak inhabitants, houses of culture were built for representative purposes. Different confessional, national or professional groups felt obligated to present themselves and their ideas through this sort of platform.

Although it is important to mention the historic roots of this phenomenon, it is not the main subject of our research interests. Therefore, our research will be focused on the specific features of establishing houses of culture during the communist period.

The communist period of Czechoslovakian history started in 1948, with the new totalitarian regime requiring a useful platform for spreading its new ideology. Houses of culture were to be used for this purpose. Thus, there was building boom concerning houses of culture during the period from the 1950s to the 1970s by the communist regime in Czechoslovakia (Sedláková, 2014, p. 25). Between the years 1958 and 1961, for example, 661 and 1,055 houses of culture were built in the Slovak and Czech parts of Czechoslovakia, respectively (Pokorný, 1985, p. 20).

In being interested in cultural life connected with houses of culture, we have not forgotten that the main purpose for establishing these institutions during the period 1948–1989 (Czechoslovakia under the communist regime) was to make sufficient space (both symbolically and literally) for a political agenda (propaganda). Cultural events were not the main purpose of building a huge number of houses of culture spread across the whole country. The above-mentioned Congress Centre of Prague, previously named the Palace of Culture in Prague, is a significant example of the propagandistic aim of this kind of building. Built in the 1980s, it was an enormous architectural act whose main purpose was providing sufficient space for meetings of the Communist Party. Cultural events were merely secondary to the planning of programmes.

An important and surprising finding was the fact that there has been hardly any literature written about this subject, either in Czech or Slovak areas. We were, however, able to find some statistical material and are in the process of searching for different written sources of that time.

HOUSES OF CULTURE NOWADAYS

The transformation of ownership from the communist regime to the new system of democratic government provides interesting aspects for our research. Post-communist countries share the difficult process of

transformation after the year 1989, a process which was slow but, in the end, radical. Many cultural institutions and cultural facilities vanished or slowly disappeared. The reasons for this could be found in financial problems and a lack of interest from the establishing government institution or organisation, or also due to declining interest on the side of a potential audience/visitors. We believe that we can perform a deeper analysis of this aspect of the transformation.

Houses of culture in today's cultural infrastructure

The Velvet Revolution⁶ also brought about a crucial change in cultural infrastructure. After the year 1989, one may observe various changes to cultural infrastructure, namely: the operative authority of the regional and district authorities, meaning bottom-up cultural politics; an increase in the number of cultural subjects; an increase in the diversity of cultural subjects; new multifunctional cultural organisations; the establishment of community centres by transforming the purpose of houses of culture. Cultural events and life stopped relating to the building (in the real estate sense), meaning that various cultural events started to be organised in various kinds of venues, such as industrial sites (abandoned factories). Other factors which completely changed what was on offer culturally was the need to attract visitors to cultural programmes. Such programmes had to be interesting, creative and differ according to the diverse needs of the audience (for example, the programme was to vary according to the age of the audience). Although the non-governmental sector and the private sector were involved in this area, the cultural infrastructure has suffered from cuts to its financial budget (Lázňovská, 2014).

While comparing the past and the present condition of cultural life regarding houses of culture in the later phase of the research project, one must be prepared to cope with the various and deep changes to the cultural infrastructure in the context of a changing social and political system. A process of reflection on all these changes is part of the contemporary discussion within the daily discourse of the mass media, as well as in a professional context.

⁶ The so-called Velvet Revolution or Gentle Revolution is the name given to the fall of the communist regime in communist Czechoslovakia in autumn 1989. The change started with a peaceful demonstration on November 17th at Wenceslas Square in Prague.

In this regard, it is also important to provide a professional definition of houses of culture as employed in recent academic and professional discussions, namely:

The concept of a House of Culture may be imagined as a property, in which legal entities operate and are engaged in the organisation of a variety of cultural and educational activities (Letošní téma, 2009).⁷

As mentioned above, houses of culture are part of the cultural infrastructure or one type in a range of cultural facilities.

The most recent count of houses of culture was conducted for the Slovak Republic in 2006 which found that there were 2,491 such institutions in the country (Čukan, 2006, p. 13). The majority of houses of culture were established by local authorities, basically by municipal authorities.

The division of ownership concerning houses of culture in the Slovak Republic in 2006 was as follows:

- 94.8% – established by municipal authorities
- 1.6% – Church-run
- Around 1% – corporations or companies (frequent owners of houses of culture during the previous regime)
- 0.5% – state-run
- Around 1% – other entities (Čukan, 2006, p. 13).

As may be seen, the most significant owner of houses of culture are municipalities and local authorities. One of the main problems they face is covering all the costs which are connected with managing and maintaining these mostly oversized buildings in terms of their dimensions and capacity.

In order to view the problem of houses of culture from the institutional side, we provide one of several taxonomies of cultural institutions as prepared by Lenka Lázňovská.

Typology of cultural institutions:

- a) According to the type of services
 - Memory institutions (museums, galleries, monuments)
 - Institutions for education and institutions for providing information (libraries)
 - Creative institutions (theatres, concert groups, dance ensembles)
 - Production institutions (houses of culture, clubs and others)

⁷ All translations come from the author of the article unless indicated otherwise.

- b) According to the type of facility
 - Institutions which are based in a building
 - Institutions without a permanent place of work (volunteering base)
- c) According to the law
 - Governmental (contributory organisations)
 - Non-governmental (associations, foundations, church clubs and business associations)
- d) According to the purpose of their establishment
 - Profit-based organisations
 - Non-profit organisations (Lázňovská, 2014, p. 9).

IDEOLOGICAL SCOPE OF OUR RESEARCH

Besides studying the process of change between the communist and post-communist periods, we are interested in different dimensions which create our research framework. In this chapter, we will introduce some of the key concepts which concern our research project and are also reflected in academic discourse.

Community

This is one of the key concepts concerning various sociocultural contexts (cultural politics, project management, but also in the arts, science, and political or religious life). The Latin origin of the word “community” – *communitas* – means not only community, but also affection toward community life. Nowadays, we can see increasing interest in the subject of community from different points of view. Our interest may be seen in the dichotomy of “Gemeinschaft” – “Gessellschaft”, based on the theory of Ferdinand Toennies.

Local culture

Proportionally to the interest of a community and life in a community, we may observe an increasing interest in the existence of local culture.

The status and the conditions of local culture are very important regarding the utilisation of houses of culture.

Public space

The role of choosing a specific site for houses of culture was important for forming the public space in small towns and villages, as well as in big towns.

Freedom

One of the interesting issues is to find out how people (connected in different ways with houses of culture) describe these institutions, in terms of what they meant for them. In the public view, houses of culture were used to shape the public space and often built next to churches, not to be only on the opposite side in symbolic way but also literally.

However, one may pose the question whether there were any gaps, or there was a place for active people who were, for example, able to prepare programme of events which not only supported political ideology but also generated space for creativity.

Houses of culture shaped public spaces in different ways, especially in small towns and villages. The question of restricting the freedom of the citizens of these towns and villages is specifically bound up with these institutions.

MEMORY STUDIES

This research project concerning houses of culture as places of/in memory constitutes part of an academic field called memory studies, if one understands houses of culture as institutions, which we can use as a methodological tool for studying and analysing memory. The phenomenon of nostalgia also constitutes part of memory studies, and which is, in addition, a part of our research interests.

The core interest of memory studies is collective memory and cultural-historical memory. Although these two notions are close to each other, their history is very different. The notion of collective memory has its origin in the French academic tradition (we may find it in the work of Émile Durkheim⁸). On the other hand, the notion of social memory, national memory and cultural-historical memory is connected with the German academic tradition. Memory research is spread across different social and human sciences. Hence, transdisciplinarity is one of the essential characteristics of this field of study.

The relationship between individual and collective memory is important for our research project. Thus, the position of Maurice Halbwachs is close to the project in question, namely that:

⁸ *The Rules of Sociological Method* published in 1895.

Halbwachs was suggesting that an individual's memory is always situated within a collective or group consciousness of an event or shared memories, whether at a family, community or even national level. Furthermore, for Halbwachs, the function of memory is to unite us socially, which means that commonly agreed upon memories will tend to predominate and alternative ones will receive little recognition and therefore fade (Abrams, 2010, p. 96).

Therefore, both theoretical concepts of social/collective memory are important for our research project and we will operate within their frameworks.

METHODOLOGY

In order to carry out our research project, we mean to use several types of research methods. As mentioned earlier, the first stage of our project is based on assembling archival materials, which means working in various archives in the Czech and Slovak Republics (formerly Czechoslovakia). We assume that a lot of material may be found in archives in Prague, due to the centralised state economic system operating during the communist period in Czechoslovakia. That means that almost everything was planned and prepared by the central government which was based in Prague.

The next step requires getting an overview of the field of the academic literature. As our research field is part of cultural studies, we stress transdisciplinarity as our professional basis. We shall be interested in material and articles from various social sciences, such as history, sociology, but perhaps also statistics and economics. Therefore, we are prepared to study various sources from different fields of social sciences.

Besides archival research, the basis of our project will be formed by interviews. According to the aims of our project, we have decided to use the oral history method for conducting qualitative interviews focused on houses of culture from different points of view. We will try to find active people who "brought culture to life" in certain places (small towns and villages), as well as those local people who attended various events. In the future, we plan to compare their history to the contemporary condition and status of houses of culture.

WHY HAVE WE CHOSEN THE ORAL HISTORY METHOD?

Oral history is a method which provides different kinds of possibilities for researchers to work with. First of all, it is a tool for conducting interviews.

This is followed by various possibilities of analysing the interviews. Oral history is a qualitative method used not only by historians but also by other social scientists. Oral history is based on the carrying out of unstructured interviews. In the words of the historian Lynn Abrams:

Oral history is a practice, a method of research. It is the act of recording the speech of people with something interesting to say and then analysing their memories of the past (2010, p. 1).

Subsequently, however, Abrams puts it in more complicated manner and draws our attention to the fact that oral history means two things at the same time:

It refers to the process of conducting and recording interviews with people in order to elicit information from them about the past. But oral history is also the product of interview, the narrative account of past events (2010, p. 2).

This means it is not only a method, but also the result of the process of applying this method.

One of the possibilities of applying the oral history method is conducting interviews about certain periods of a narrator's life (for example, their childhood during the WWII) or a specific event in history (for instance, the Velvet Revolution in 1989). For the purpose of our research, the second methodological option (related to a specific event in history) is the most suitable.

This qualitative method, therefore, supports the aim of our project and is capable of advancing its aims. Interviews or narration can develop materials and support the "history from below" approach.

Oral history is a method which can be used in different ways and in different areas. Since finding and finally establishing its place in the academic world, it has also become a discipline of itself. In the words of Lynn Abrams:

. . . it is a discipline with undisciplined tendencies, continually using other disciplinary approaches, and in flux as it defines acceptable practices and models of theorising (2010, p. 32).

In effect, conducting oral history and biographical research may be viewed as a unique way of preserving one's history, cultural differences and heritage.

PILOT STUDY

The first step, after collecting and studying the research literature, is intended to prepare a pilot study with two research subjects. For this case, we have chosen two houses of culture, one in a small town called **Želiezovce** (Photo 1) and the other in a village called **Župkov** (Photo 2), both in the central part of Slovakia.



Photo 1. House of Culture in Želiezovce. Photo taken in August 2016 by doctor Beáta Beke.

Želiezovce (located in the historical region/county of Tekov) is a small town which is home to 7,186 inhabitants (according to the last census in 2011) (Obyvateľstvo, n.d.). It is typical for its mix of two nationalities, namely Slovak and Hungarian – with 3,550 inhabitants (49.40%) of Slovak nationality and 3,501 inhabitants (48.72%) of Hungarian nationality. This may be an important, perhaps crucial point in this case. In line with the history of establishing cultural houses, nationality was one of the significant features. Indeed, the cultural life (which cannot exist without political life) of a certain area/town/village was framed by this feature. Religious diversity, which was under persecution during the communist period of Czechoslovak history, may be also an interesting point to examine.

Župkov (located in the same historical region/county called Tekov) is a small village with 740 inhabitants (Demografické údaje, n.d.). In contrast to the trend towards urbanisation (moving away from countryside), one can observe a slight increase in the number of inhabitants in Župkov. This could prove to be an interesting point for us, namely whether running the local house of culture is cost-effective in this context.



Photo 2. House of Culture in Župkov. Photo taken in August 2016 by doctor Petra Chovancová.

CONCLUSION

In this paper, we have introduced the main ideas, goals and aims of a long-term research project based in the field of cultural studies. The key concept is to view the communist era through memories of houses of culture in former Czechoslovakia under a totalitarian regime.

We started with a presentation of a definition, or definitions of a house of culture and emphasised the diversity of such institutions in Czechoslovakia. In this regard, it was important to stress that houses of culture were one of the ideological tools of the totalitarian system.

The newly starting project is rooted in contemporary trends in the social sciences. One of these trends is to focus on studying the communist era. Although there are many topics which relate to this subject, not all of them have been explored. One of the topics constituting the subject of our interest concerns cultural infrastructure and cultural facilities. We will attempt to build a picture based on the memories of historical witnesses who were connected in some way to houses of culture. In this sense, our project is rooted in the field of memory studies.

While the aim of our project is ambitious, we hope, at the same time, that our objectives will be fulfilled, at least partially, in the near future. We believe that our subject will be of interest not only to the academic community but will also be enriching for those participating in our research project.

PICTURES

1. Palace of Science and Culture in Warsaw [image] (n.d.). Retrieved February 9, 2018, from http://res.cloudinary.com/ara/image/upload/c_fit,w_800/1077.JPG
2. Congress Centre in Prague [image] (n.d.). Retrieved February 9, 2018, from <https://i2.wp.com/etn.travel/wp-content/uploads/2016/12/0a1a1-11.jpg?fit=420%2C315>
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